

[Mary Gunnaway]

Project #3613

Verner Lea

Columbia, S. C.

11/10/38 LIFE STORIES

MARY GUNNAWAY

2715 MILLWOOD AVENUE COLUMBIA, S. C.

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Mary Gunnaway, a negro octogenarian, lives in a renovated outhouse on the grounds of Mrs. F. C. Hoefer at 2715 Millwood Avenue, Columbia, South Carolina. Her little one-room cabin nestles in the spacious backyard of a big, white old-fashioned home, and gives a pleasing rustic effect to the grounds.

A gentle tap on the door brought the sound of a creaking chair, then the shuffling of footsteps inside. The door was opened by a small, old Negro woman. She was dressed in a short checked sweater, black woolen skirt, and a white apron, around her head was tied a white rag, and over this she wore a small black felt hat. She also wore large gold earrings. Her face was careworn and wrinkled with age, but, with a cherry "good morning," I was ushered into the home and presence of my ancient hostess.

It was a chilly November day, and the glowing coals and steaming kettle gave me a feeling of warmth and welcome, and it pleased her when I told her that. I was given a low chair by the hearth and she took a similar one.

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"Aunt Mary, I've heard so much about you from my friend, Mrs. Hoefer (Hafer). For a long time I've wanted to come in and have a little chat with you." At the mention of Mrs. Hoefer's name, her face became animated, and her small black eyes sparkled, when suddenly she brushed a tear away with the back of her gnarled and bony old hand. "Thems good folks, praise God, them Good folks!"

"You see dis house I's living in, Mis' Hoefer she done it. After my husband C10- [?] - S.C.

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died, and no chillun or nobody to hep me, the white folks say I hafter go to Poor House. When de ole haid die everthing go to rack. So I came here to Mis' Hoefer, and I cry and I beg her to take me, jest put me anywheres so's to hide me from de Poor House. Dis wuz de chicken house, she tuk en boarded hit up, put in de fireplace, de window, en de door, en give hit to me long as I live.

"Sam, my husband, had de chills en fever, en he jest fell off to skin en bones. When he died, I tuk down wid rheumatism, en couldn't work, and dat's when I come here to Mis' Hoefer. She knowed my Ma and Pa, en I knowed she would hope me.

"Praise de Lord deys good folks! I washed de clothes en I nussed her Billy when he wuz a baby. I never thought I'd live to see him git learning, but he sho' is got learning, and keep learning more out here at dat new school."

I looked around the little one-room shack which constituted a happy home to this old darkey. In one corner stood a pale blue iron bed, and in another an old-fashioned dresser, the remaining furnishings consisted of four low chairs, a table, a few dishes, a trunk and numerous boxes. She seemed to notice that I was taking undue note of the surroundings, when she proudly said: "I use to have heap more 'en dis, but I give hit all away," and she reached under the bed and pulled out a flat giant-size clothes basket, proudly boasting of

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many a beautiful wash she had carried up and down the big road in that basket during her younger days.

"I's so old now I can't git about much. I cleans up my house en sweeps 'round de door. I hate it I can't git 'round like I use'to. Some o' dem young gals don't do nothin', dey don't do like de old times. All de little chillun out here know me, dey say: 'Hey Aunt Mary, wish you could git 'round like us.'

"I hope Marse Billy dig sweet 'tatoes, he cut path wid hoe, so I kin git through de weeds. He dig 'em, en I pick 'em up. He say, 'You can't git 'round like me.' I say, 'Hush boy, when I's your age you couldn't git 'bout like me.'

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En we jest laughs. Sometime I gits tired jest settin' 'round en doin' nothin', so I gits my rake en rakes up de yard en sings.

"Marse Billy seed me comin' 'cross de road de day I went to store for some 'bacco, en he said: 'You knowed I git your 'bacco if you jest wait 'til I git home, sposin' a car come 'long en knock you down!'" At which remark she chuckled lustily.

"I don't know how ole I is. Pa had all our age wrote down in de Book, but after he die de Book burn up. When de old haid die everthing go to rack. All of um dead en gone. I ain't jest got here. Sometime I feels right feeble, en I can't see so good. Mis' Ida give me somethin' to rub wid, when I git dat misery in my neck, en hit hopes it.

"My pa was William Gunnaway, en he 'blonged to de Prestons. Pa looked after de yard en all de flowers. He use to bring Mis' Ida's mama flowers from de Preston place. Pa had three wives, en when he died his last wife's gal got de house en everthing, hit wuz on House Street. Fore he die, I say: 'Pa, how come you don't fix up your will? You'se gittin' old en might drop off.' Pa laugh, en say he feel good. Dat very day pa walk all 'round de place, jest keep walkin', en dat very nite I hear somebody knock on my door, en say, 'You better

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come see 'bout you pa.' I say, 'Pa all right 'cause I seed him do a sight of walkin' today. En he say, 'Your pa daid.' Sho' 'nough he drop off dat very night.

"Dat gal what didn't 'blong to Pa sold de house, but de man what bought hit name Mr. Monroe, en he rent hit to us right cheap, for seventy-five cents a month, en I live there 'til my husband die, 'bout five years.

"My husband name Sam Oliver, en he cook fer Mis' Richardson. Me and him work on de Frank Sims Place, en he give us three acres o' land to farm. We make bale o' cotton every year. We plant on de moon sign en make good crop all de time. On 4 Saday we didn't never work, but go to town, en buy so much things I have to ride back. Buy everthing, sugar, coffee, meat, en pretty dress goods. People come to see me en say: 'How come you buy so much?' I say: 'I likes to have stuff to pass 'round to my friends.' En we go to bank o' 'tatoes en gives um 'tatoes.

"Country ain't like hit use'to be. Nobody can't tell me hit is, for I know hit ain't. I'd git up day break, en cook, en drink coffee, en take more coffee to de field to drink. When twelve o'clock ring fer dinner, en bread done rise up en I cooks agin. Times wus good then. I still gits out at day break, I ain't use to layin' in de bed. Mis' Ida say: 'How come you gits up so soon?' I say: 'I got to clean up en sweep de yard,' en she laugh at me. Man name Bryan bought Frank Sims place. He use' to run a livey stable. I sho' miss de ole times. But de Lord sho' been good to me to send me here to Mis' Ida. Mis' Ida give me coffee in de morning, night en all de time. Den I git de grounds en bile um over. People don't make de coffee like dey use' to. I likes to bile de grounds agin.

"Deys sho's good folks. When dey go 'way I jest miss um so, I goes out en jest look up and down de road. Gal next door say: 'Who you lookin' fer?' I say: 'Nobody.' Warn't none of her business. If I see somebody pass, I goes right behind em en say: 'Who is you?' 'Cause deys liable to break in or do some devilment.

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"Aunt Mary, somebody came in my home a few days ago, and stole a nice chicken I'd baked the night before."

"You ain't say! People do dirty tricks dese days. Dey knowed when you wus cookin' hit. I don't see how de Lord let hit go down de throat so easy. I ain't bet nothin' I knows people do's low-down tricks dese days. You lock up your house, honey, or de low-life devils will steal all your clothes. I can't live 'mongst dem kind of people, but deys a heap o' em. I's always live wid good honest folks. When 5 Mr. Hoefer go to Atlanta dat time, he leave me plenty coffee to drink. When he come back I 'member he et a big breakfast en he jest sing dat morning. I don't 'member name of hymn he sing. I say to Mis' Ida, 'What dat he sing?' Hit was sho' pretty hymn. He had two pretty bird dogs, en when he left to go to town dat morning, dey ran up to him en dey jest bark en bark, en I say to Mis' Ida: 'What make dem dogs bark so strange like?' En he die dat morning. Dem dogs knowed 'bout hit, en give us de sign. I hear'd heap o' signs. In de olden times dey b'lieve in um. I hear'd heap o' old grannies say if you confined, don't let nobody come in your house en take out any uv your fire, hits bad luck. En don't never pay back salt, 'cause hits bad luck. If your dish cloth fall on de floor, a drunkard comin' to your house. I hear'd all de ole time people say dat.

"I sho' miss Mis' Ida's ma. When she die I jest holler. One mornin' I see de house all tore up, en I say: 'Wonder is Mis' Hoefer daid?' I went in de house en everthing seem strange like, en Mis' Ida say, 'Mama's daid.' En I jest holler, I couldn't hep hit." After this remark, Aunt Mary pulled an old box from a corner in the room, and began displaying most reverently, one garment after another that belonged to Miss Ida's mother. She had fallen heir to numerous old dresses, sweaters, etc., all several sizes too large for her.

"I puts on dis suit when I rides wid Mis' Ida. She give me pair o' brand new shoes, too. Brand new, ain't never been wore. Sho' good folks.

"I got a brother Efram living down dis same road. He on de Frank Sims place. Sister Emma, she daid. I got 'nother sister, she gone off. I don't know if she daid or live. She was

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in Charleston, last time I heard she gone way off down yonder to Georgetown. I knowed all ma's folks, but none of my pa's. Pa come from Virginia.

“Ma died on a Saday, en buried on a Sunday.

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“I never did went to school in my life, them was slavery times. I never did went.

“Me en ma en Grandma Philis lived on de Hampton place, name Millwood. My grandma cook, ma wash en iron. Dey had big fine wash house, en a big chimley where we'd hang pot en cook. Ma tell me 'make some fire 'round dem pots.'

“Dey had a round well, call hit system. One fer colored people, one fer white, had a house over hit. Had loom house fer colored people en everthing. Had big place fer colored people to play. Had a mill to grind de corn. I wus little, but I use'to go grind, too.

“I was jest so high when de war come. I 'member de song what we sing 'bout de Yankees.” At this remark she sang the following with utter abandon, patting her knees and keeping time with her feet: “Yankee gun what comin' tomorrow Little gal I'm gwine away, Yankee gun what comin' tomorrow Little gal I'm gwine away. Come on Lindi, Come on Cindi Little gal, I'm gwine away.

“Yankees burned up everthing. I 'member when dey set all Marse Hampton's cotton on fire. I 'member when Yankee throw bomb, en a little boy pick hit up, hit went off en blow de little boy up. Yankees burned up everthing, ain't nothin' left but de brick at Millwood now, but de same big ole tree I always swing in is still standing.

“Dem days won't all sad though. No, mam! Dey wuz plenty o' big doin's, too.” She slapped her knee and laughed gleefully at former recollections.

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"Dey had heap o' parties, en dey dance and have fine rashions. De ladies had fine dresses. I use to stand en peep through a crack in de door, en when 7 Marse Hampton see me, he say: 'Git 'way from dat door.'

"I 'members when dey brought Marse Hampton home, en I seed him when he die."

"Was that General Hampton, Aunt Mary?" "No, mam! Dat wasn't General Hampton, dat was Marse Wade Hampton, Governor Hampton. Dem was sad times.

"I 'members when heap o' colored people come on de train from Mississippi.

"I don't do no cookin' in my house. Lord, child, Mis' Hoefer say I too ole to cook, say I burn myself up. She feed me from her kitchen, jest give me all I wants to eat. Sometime she let me bake sweet 'tatoes in de pot," and she pointed at a dutch oven in a corner of the room. "I bakes 'nough fer dem, too.

"I use to go to church in de country, call hit Methodist. Dat House of Prayer over on Cherry Street ain't much church. No, mam, dat house ain't much church, hit jest want de money. I ain't never stop at dat place.

"I don't go no place now, widout Mis' Ida take me. If de moon ain't shining I recon' I goes to bed right soon, but when de moon shine, I puts out my lamp en sets in de door and smokes my pipe. I kin see better in de moonlight den de sunlight. When de moon shine, I don't know how long I sets up. But when I hears dat ole rooster crow, I knows its 'bout time fer to go to bed.

"I smokes George Washington 'bacco, all I kin git. I takes a little dram, too, when I kin git it."

"Well, I'm coming back to see you and bring you some George Washington tobacco, and a little dram, too, if I can get it."

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She caught me by the arm and walked with me as far as Mrs. Hoefer's kitchen. When on parting she was heard to say: "Mis' Hoefer, I got to go clean up my house now, the lady say she comin' back."